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Dying Prepared in Medieval and Early Modern Northern Europe. Edited by Anu Lahtinen and Mia Korpiola. Leiden: Brill, 2018 [Book review]

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Anu Lahtinen and Mia Korpiola, eds.

Dying Prepared in Medieval and Early Modern Northern Europe. The Northern World: North Europe and the Baltic c. 400–1700 AD. Peoples, Economies and Cultures 82. Leiden: Brill, 2018. Pp. 211. Hb, \$109.00.

The historians contributing to the book are based at universities in Finland, Poland, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Their contributions focus on preparations for death in medieval Iceland, fourteenth-century Winchester, Reformation and early modern Sweden, and sixteenth-century Lesser Poland. Approaching the topic from various angles—from the restless dead to deathbed confessions, from dying unprepared to suicide—the contributors investigate sources such as Icelandic sagas, legal documents, chronicles (*tänkeböcker*), and funeral sermons.

The emphasis of the book is on the “complicated everyday level” (7). This is both a strength and—depending on the reader’s interests—a weakness: the focus on everyday concerns and experiences join the chapters together in a way that results in a convincing exposition of its central theme. Also, the book offers fascinating insights into medieval and early modern thoughts and anxieties from the point of view of people who did not leave behind well-known, published literary testimonies. At the same time, however, this means that there is less room for analyses of broader theological and intellectual developments (such issues are most fully discussed in the concluding remarks by Bertil Nilsson). Readers who are more interested in high-profile *ars moriendi* literature might be disappointed to learn that the book does not discuss such works as Jean Gerson’s *De arte moriendi* (which is mentioned, however) or the Jesuit Robert Bellarmine’s *De arte bene moriendi*.

The book offers a collection of rich, detailed, and often impressive essays, which make an important contribution to the history of *ars moriendi*. At the beginning of her chapter on the concern for salvation in sixteenth-century Lesser Poland, Dominika Burdzy quotes Anselm of Canterbury’s maxim, “nihil certius morte, nihil hora mortis incertius” (nothing is more certain than death, nothing more uncertain than the hour of death). The quote captures the essence of medieval and early modern attitudes towards death. Since the moment of death is uncertain, one should always be prepared for it; since death is certain, one should reflect on afterlife and salvation.

The book revolves around the notions of well-prepared, peaceful death and salvation. What kind of preparations were believed to secure salvation? Although “death never quite followed the ideal pattern” (125), the idea of *mors beata* “required the presence of family and friends” and spiritual preparations such as “confession, absolution” and sometimes “extreme unction” (89). The

prospect of unexpected death caused anxiety, because it made appropriate preparations impossible. Even those who were planning a suicide were troubled by the idea of not being able to have a good, spiritually prepared death. Some went as far as committing “suicide indirectly,” by purposefully committing capital crimes in order to receive “the last rites” (182).

While chiefly focusing on the proper preparations for *mors beata/bona*, the book embraces two secondary themes. First, interaction between the dead and the living. This interaction—or liminality—is discussed for example in Kirsi Kanerva’s chapter on “restless dead” and “peaceful cadavers” in medieval Iceland. A fusion of pagan and Christian beliefs, this was a culture concerned about the prospect of malicious revenants and thus geared up for both facilitating *mors bona* and for preventing the restless dead from returning to harm the living. A further aspect of the interaction between the dead and the living relates to the notions of purgatory and intercessions. As demonstrated in Burdzy’s chapter on sixteenth-century Lesser Poland and by Cindy Wood in her chapter on William Wykeham (1366–1404), the bishop of Winchester, it was a matter of utmost importance to make sure that somebody would pray for your soul after your death. Those who prayed for the dead had the power to relieve the suffering that the dead would experience in purgatory. This changed, however, when the Reformation rejected both the idea of purgatory and the idea that intercessions had the power to influence afterlife. Reformation led to a new emphasis on “faith and divine grace instead of deeds and intercession” (92). These changes had implications on the interaction between the dead and the living.

Once the power of intercessions had been denied, Protestants focused on funeral arrangements. This leads us to the second sub-theme of the book, namely, the pragmatic, social and economic consequences of death. While in the Reformed Northern Europe the living could no longer help the dead through intercessions, the influence the dead had on the living was accentuated as the preparations for death began to emphasize the importance of wills and the “settling of one’s economic commitments” (128). As Anu Lahtinen demonstrates in her chapter on aristocratic death in Reformation Sweden, arrangements for ensuring the “division of property and the future of those left behind” were sometimes made “decades before the death” (128). The economic aspects of death are also discussed in Mia Korpiola’s chapter on the legal authority of deathbed confessions in medieval and early modern Sweden. Since deathbed confessions were considered particularly truthful and had “a special status in Swedish law,” they were used to “determine ownership, property rights, and the existence of possible debts” as well as “paternity or suspected partnership in crime” (102).

Arguably, the most controversial claim in the book is the one made by Otfried Czaika in his chapter on dying unprepared in early modern Sweden. Analysing funeral sermons that discuss the lives of a drowned person, soldiers killed in action, children who died young and a mother who died with unborn twins in her womb, Czaika concludes that “nobody died unprepared in early modern Sweden” (144). When describing the lives of those who had died unprepared, early modern funeral sermons emphasized the piety of the deceased. Whether this means that “nobody died unprepared” is debatable. In her chapter on suicide, Riikka Miettinen points out that although funeral sermons presented pious life as a sufficient “means of grace even in cases of sudden deaths,” in practice “the manner or way of death also mattered” (176). As Miettinen concludes, “suicide was certainly not a ‘good death’” (177).

The book makes an excellent contribution not only to the history of *ars moriendi*, but also to our understanding of the everyday concerns and anxieties of medieval and early modern Europeans. By and large, it confirms Philippe Ariès’s observations about the communal nature of medieval death and the later, anxious attitude towards the demise of self. Given that the book focuses on Northern Europe (and especially Sweden), the Society of Jesus plays no role in it. However, its discussion of everyday spiritual concerns in Northern Europe is valuable also for those historians whose primary interests focus on early modern Catholicism and early Jesuits whose ministry to the dying and their own writings on *ars morendi* were paramount to the Society’s mission.

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Vera Moynes, ed.,

The Jesuit Irish Mission: A Calendar of Correspondence, 1566–1752 Subsidia ad Historiam Societatis Iesu series, Volume 16. Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu. Pp. xxxviii + 654. Hb, €60.00.

Here is Father General Claudio Acquaviva being very fatherly in March 1612. Writing to the scholastic Laurence Lea [Lee] of Waterford, he expresses concern for the twenty-eight year old: “I hope that it will be possible that all deep melancholic trouble be taken away and followed by the desired calmness of the mind; this I wish God give you, together with a bountiful blessing of heavenly offerings” (29–30). Lea must have remained unsettled because he later